

Thursday, May 20, 1965

LOCAL BURGHERS WERE DOWNCAST UPON HEARING THE SAD NEWS

The old town of Duxbury on Massachusetts Bay is inconsolable. It is whispered among the villagers that the cable is to be temporarily discontinued and its passing, even for a brief time, is viewed with dismay. For this cable, the first direct link between France and the United States, has been a landmark in the town since that gala day back in 1869 when the Chiltern steamed into Duxbury harbor and dropped the American end of over three thousand miles of insulated copper strands on the sandy beach at Rouse's Hummock.

Few towns in America are richer in historical lore than Duxbury, once the home of Myles Standish and John Alden, of Brewster and built clipper ships known in every port.

Those glamorous days stretch far into the past, it is true, but Duxbury is justly proud of their heritage and clings tenaciously to the things that are outstanding in the town's history. At a time when the town was sinking into obscurity, its industry declining, its shipbuilding only a memory, its youth rapidly leaving to seek success elsewhere, the French-Atlantic Cable Company established headquarters in the building that once housed a bank long since closed, and the ancient village sprang into prominence and became famous almost over night.

There are still many citizens of the town who can remember when the cable was brought ashore and this event, together with the celebration that followed, has been described so often to succeeding generations that the whole story has become almost a legend to be handed down through the years. Naturally enough, the abandonment of the cable, even though temporary, disturbs the Duxbury folk and there is much shaking of heads and audible regret in the quiet town by the sea. When anything has been taken for granted for years and years, has indeed become a fixture in the minds of the oldest inhabitants, a change, no matter of what nature, is likely to be deplored. It takes on an importance out of measure, possibly, with its real significance.

One can well understand, however, the attitude of the Duxbury citizens. When the Chiltern and her sister ship the Scanderla steamed into the harbor with the cable they also brought crews of strong and sturdy young men whose task it was not only to install the cable but to maintain it. Many of this group were mere youths who had embarked on the enterprise as an adventure, intending, no doubt to return to their native land after their task was accomplished.

The girls of Duxbury were passing fair and their charms, apparently outweighed such allegiance as the invaders held for the Old World. Sooner or later these young men who came to install a cable and then depart married into the families of Duxbury and settled down for life in their new country. The town had its share of attractive girls in those days and the remark made to the writer by one Duxbury woman that the landing of the cable saved a lot of girls from spinsterhood surely must not be taken too seriously.

Nearly all of the newcomers were of English descent, so they easily slipped into the social life of the town. As these Englishmen and their American wives lived out the span of their married lives the cable, naturally, played an important part in their existence. It was the cable that brought them together and it was the cable that

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supported many of them. Even though it is no longer as important as it once was it is easily seen why it ranks so high in the hearts and minds of so many of the villagers.

Only One Survivor Alive Today

Only one survivor of the original crew is alive today. There were two young men in that first group and both were named Green. The Christian name of one was George, Alfred was the other. The hair and beard of one was dark, of the other, light. What more natural then, that one should be called "light" Green and the other "dark" Green? It is Alfred Green, nicknamed the "light," who lives today as the Omega of his clan. He was one of the many who married Duxbury girls and he has spent the larger part of his life on Duxbury soil. Nothing pleases him more than to ask him about the celebration of the landing of the cable. "Those were pre-prohibition days," he replies with a chuckle. "Champagne flowed around here like a river in spring freshet. It was a big time, I'll tell you, a big time. Nothing like it nowadays."

And on reading the records of that famous day one is inclined to agree with him. To begin with, a town meeting was held and resolutions were unanimously adopted appointing a committee for the purpose of making necessary arrangements for a successful celebration of the event, a "celebration worthy the ancient renown of the old Pilgrim town of Duxbury.

Six Hundred Guests in Tent

Plates were laid in the tent for six hundred guests. Shortly after two o'clock the distinguished guests arrived, among them being Sir James Anderson, Lord Cecil, Viscount Parker, Mayor Shurtleff of Boston and many others. The Plymouth band played a spirited air and the guests were seated at the head table, with the Honorable Stephen N. Gifford as toastmaster.

His task was no sinecure as the dinner was followed by frequent and fervid bursts of oratory. The flags of all three nations were vigorously waved, science was applauded and the spirit of brotherly love permeated the meeting. Messages of good will were sent and received over the cable and, all-in-all, the celebration was an unqualified success.

Time has wrought many changes, however, and the cable that was ushered in so auspiciously and with such enthusiasm no longer plays the important part for which it was designed. During the war it was crowded with messages but in later years it has not been so heavily laden. And it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep it from breaking. When it was originally laid it ran from Brest, France, to the tiny island of St. Pierre and thence to Duxbury, it being a stipulation of the French Government in granting the concession that the cable should touch only French and American soil. From Duxbury to St. Pierre the cable ran along what is called the continental shelf whose maximum depth is about 500 fathoms. This course lies between Browns and Georges Banks and it is here that the cable is frequently broken by the beam trawlers which often tear it from the hidden depths with disastrous results.

Cables Have Enemies

Storms sometimes wear away the shore ends and occasionally the chemical composition of the mud at the bottom of the sea gradually eats away the cable. Cables have many enemies and it is a tremendous task to keep one in running order at all times. When it is considered what an undertaking it is to lay a cable and what an important part it plays in world communication nothing but regret can be felt that this old veteran is to be abandoned for the present.

Perhaps you have seen the instruments in the old bank building at Duxbury receiving a message. If you haven't you may be interested to know that the messages are written by an extremely sensitive, hollow glass needle on a strip of paper about the size of a typewriter ribbon. This needle moves back and forth at right angles to the length of the tape, producing a result that closely resembles the sharply defined hills and valleys of a statistician's chart on business conditions or the price of butter, or what not. The trained operator reads these hills and valleys as the dots and dashes of the telegrapher's code and types off the messages as the tape flows by him.

The fragile needle that once was so active is still now, the "Moving finger writes; and having writ, moves on." To adapt Omar a bit further, the inhabitants of Duxbury hope that time, in the years ahead, will somehow "lure it back."

The Honorable Stephen N. Gifford, clerk of the Massachusetts Senate, was chosen chairman of the committee, or as this important post was called in those times, President of the Day. Invitations were sent to the governor of Massachusetts, to the mayor of Boston and to other prominent men eminent in other walks of life.

The governor was unable to attend but he sent a section of the Second Battery of Light Artillery. They mounted two of their pieces on the summit of a nearby hill and added to the joy of the day by firing salutes at frequent intervals. In the words of the historian of the day, "they proved quite an accession to the appliances for the celebration."

Several of the prominent men of the day sent their regrets, among them being Ralph Waldo Emerson and Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Many others, however, were able to be present and from what the historian has left us none of them regretted their attendance. A mammoth tent for the banquet was erected on Abraham's Hill, an eminence overlooking the beach, the Hummock and the track of the cable across the marsh. The flags of America, France and England adorned the summit of the tent. The inspired historian, who, by the way, appears to be nameless, cut loose with a fine flow of language in describing the favorable weather. "A summer's sun bathed the landscape in brilliant light; a refreshing southwest breeze woke the distant waters into life and woke the distant waters into life and motion, while an azure sky overspread the ocean, and doubled its own placid beauty by reflecting its deep tints in that mighty mirror. The blue waters contrasted delightfully with the green plain of marsh which spread out beneath, while a gay and joyous crowd added to the beauty of natural scenery the higher attractions of genial human converse and pleasant laughter. The fresh, pure breeze that came rustling from the bosom of the sea bore an exhilarating influence on its wings, which stimulated the health and appetites of all present."

Reading between the lines one gathers that it was a pleasant day and that all was well.

Our historian was nothing if not complete and he was careful to include the gentler sex in his account. He wrote: "Among the spectators was a large proportion of ladies, who redoubled the charm of the summer sunshine by the smiles and graces of their presence." These must have been the same ladies who, on the day the cable was landed "clapped their hands and waved their handkerchiefs," decorous enough behavior that did not step outside the bounds of propriety.